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GUEST COMMENTARY: Solution needed for Cook Inlet salmon dilemma

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The Anchorage/MatSu region is the major population center in Alaska and the fastest growing area in Alaska. Cook Inlet, an integral part of the region, separates two of Alaska's major river systems, the Kenai River watershed, on the Kenai Peninsula and the Susitna River watershed, adjacent to Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley.

This area is also unique in that it is centrally located on the only major paved highway system in Alaska, and Alaskans treasure their right to get out and fish for "their salmon" in the summer months.

Presently, 54 percent of the State's total population of 722,000 people is located in Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough. The Mat-Su Borough has been experiencing phenomenal growth, with the population having increased 50 percent in the past 10 years, from 60,000 to 91,000 people, and it is projected to double again in the next decade. A major portion of all statewide sport anglers and personal-use fishermen reportedly fish for salmon in upper Cook Inlet.

The salmon of Cook Inlet also support a traditional commercial fishery that has been sustainably operating for over 130 years. A stable number of commercial fishing permit holders (most of whom are year-round residents), the companies that process the fish, and all of the supporting businesses combine to contribute a critical portion of the economy of the Kenai Peninsula and Southcentral Alaska.

~~Some representatives of the sport angling community have spent years framing a "war" between the commercial fishery and the guide/charter businesses and recreational users. It is in everyone's best interest to resolve the conflict with long-term solutions.~~

Last year, Kenai River Late Run King salmon returns were late and some Kenai in-river sport and charter fishermen were closed down to preserve king salmon for spawning escapement, along with the Eastside Set Net fishermen, or ESSN, who fish along the beaches on the Eastside of the Inlet.

Post-season analysis showed that the 2012 closures on the Kenai were unnecessary and were the result of previously misunderstood counting and run timing issues. In addition, Mat-Su drainage sport and charter fishermen also suffered from closures.

As a result, the Alaska Board of Fisheries sanctioned a King salmon task force this winter involving major stakeholders, although a meaningful dialogue is in progress, few consensus recommendations have surfaced.

In search of solutions the following concepts need to be considered:

- There is a wealth of new information in the form of genetic studies analyzing the makeup of the ESSN king salmon catch. Genetic stock analysis indicates the commercial fishermen are not the problem they were long thought to be, and that they harvest only 13 percent of the catch, a significant new development in the time-worn debate. Additional genetic studies focused on Cook Inlet silvers need to be initiated.
- A new Kenai River Late Run King salmon study report documents that these stocks do not show a long-term pattern of decline. This new data shows no sign that Kenai Kings are overexploited, with an exploitation rate for all user groups of just under 40 percent. The conclusion from last year's fisheries, is that there was not a problem in terms of king salmon abundance, and uniform agreement that ADFG needs to develop a state of the art integrated sonar and weir system for

counting fish and to devise a daily reporting system for Kings coming into the Kenai River. Kenai River Late Run Chinook have met their escapement goal for the past 26 years.

- There are serious management conflicts between Sockeye and Chinook salmon management. Both plans direct ADFG to meet escapement goals for sustained yield management. These conflicts should be reviewed.
- Sockeye salmon provide for the needs of a much larger number of users than Chinook salmon. Cook Inlet Sockeye is the fish that drives the Kenai Peninsula economy and benefits most Alaskans. For the benefit of all user groups, ADFG needs to manage the sockeye runs for the maximum sustained yield. The commercial sector needs regulatory stability to conduct and plan business for the future. Regulatory changes and management decisions have far-reaching impacts and must be designed using the best available science. This is essential for the long-term health of the resource and the economies that are built around harvesting that resource.
- In addition, there are valid concerns about the sustainability of certain salmon stocks in northern Cook Inlet. A growing number of scientists agree the spread of Northern Pike and their predation on juvenile salmon is a huge threat to most salmon stocks in the Mat-Su drainage. ADFG needs to get more proactive in dealing with that problem and needs to help with funds for seasonal "notching" of beaver dams that are impeding salmon passage.

These are the facts that all the residents in the Cook Inlet basin will have to deal with if we want to preserve our "salmon culture." Working together will greatly increase our ability to succeed.

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